

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.

CONTROLLING NAVAL EXPEDITIONARY FORCES AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR:  
THE CASE FOR CREATING A SPECIALIZED COMMAND ORGANIZATION

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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13 May 2002

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ADA 405021  
20020814/00

# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol: C		7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): Operational Analysis of the Culminating Phase of the Battle of the Atlantic: A German <i>fait accompli</i>			
9. Personal Authors: LtCol Timothy C. Wells USMC			
10. Type of Report: FINAL		11. Date of Report: 13 May 2002	
12. Page Count: 33		12A Paper Advisor (if any):	
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Amphibious doctrine; Naval Expeditionary Forces; Amphibious command relationships; Amphibious command and control; Naval Expeditionary Task Force, Joint Force Littoral Component Commander.			
15. Abstract: Current doctrine for amphibious operations has failed to keep up with the evolution of joint warfighting doctrine and practices. The Marine Corps has transformed from being a tactical appendage of the fleet commanders to an expeditionary organization capable of planning, controlling and executing a wide spectrum of missions at the operational level of war. Meanwhile, the US Navy's alleged transformation from a blue water to littoral force is not evident when one looks at how the Navy spends its money or trains its officers. The Marine Corps's warfighting concept - "Operational Maneuver From the Sea" - provides a viable concept for the employment of Naval Expeditionary Forces in the future security environment. The Marine Expeditionary Force Command Element (MEF CE) is the best command organization for exercising C2 over littoral operations by virtue of its organization, training and leadership. A standing Naval Expeditionary Force Command Element (NEF CE) should be established in PACOM and CENTCOM to plan and control sea-based expeditionary operations for the Combatant Commander (CC). The MEF CE should provide the core of the NEF staff with the MEF Commander (3-Star) serving as the CC's functional component for littoral/expeditionary operations.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified  X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841-3556		20. Office Symbol: C	

Security Classification of This Page Unclassified

**CONTROLLING NAVAL EXPEDITIONARY FORCES AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR:  
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***Introduction***

In March 2000, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) and the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC) challenged Sailors and Marines everywhere to reflect on the state of naval command relations in the evolving strategic environment. It was hoped that this effort would stimulate frank discussion on how best to organize and employ amphibious forces during joint operations in support of a Combatant or Joint Force Commander. The senior leadership established two ground rules to govern what they hoped would be a lively debate: (1) any validated or revised concept must preserve the "special relationship" existing between the two services and; (2) the final concept must not diminish the utility of Naval Expeditionary Forces to the Joint Force Commander<sup>1</sup>.

In issuing such broad guidance, the CNO and CMC signaled their willingness to consider any approach - even the most unconventional - that would resolve the serious inconsistencies seen to exist between current doctrine and future operating concepts. The fleet was given 12 months - from 1 April 2000 to 1 April 2001 - to challenge the assumptions that underpin current amphibious warfare doctrine. The effort produced few substantive changes. The Navy permitted the terms "supporting and supported" to be included in the newest version of joint

amphibious doctrine in deference to the Marine Corps's position that this was a more accurate way to articulate command relationships within a deployed ARG/MEU. Otherwise, the new version is little more than a rehash of 60 year-old concepts. Long-standing philosophical differences were papered over instead of confronted and solved.

In many ways, the two services seem to be traveling down different paths towards transformation. While Marine Corps funding priorities reflect its focus on expeditionary operations in the littorals, the Navy continues to invest heavily in maritime sea control programs. Forcible entry remains a core Marine Corps mission, yet the Navy maintains only enough amphibious ships to transport three brigade-sized MAGTFs. The Navy embraces power projection as a core competency, yet fails to invest in critical programs (MCM, NGFS) needed to overcome anti-access strategies. Joint Force Maritime Component Commanders (JFMCC) routinely exercise OPCON of afloat MAGTFs even when a USMC component HQ is established (Afghanistan being the most recent example). Finally, the Navy holds that only sailors can command ships, while Marines believe command relationships and task organization are logically derived from the assigned mission.

### ***Thesis***

Last year's debate would have been more productive had the CNO and CMC posed the following questions for discussion and analysis:

(1) How should Naval Expeditionary Forces be employed in the context of a joint campaign or major operation?

(2) Who should command Naval Expeditionary Forces operating in the littorals?

(3) Is it time to establish a functional component commander for expeditionary/littoral warfare?

This analysis will explore these questions and offer recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness of Naval Expeditionary Forces operating in the future security environment.

### ***Historical Evolution of Amphibious Doctrine***

Today's amphibious command relationships trace their origin back to the 1920's and 1930's when Japan was seen as the most likely challenger to US preeminence in the Pacific. Navy planners of that period recognized that the United States must employ a maritime strategy to defeat Japan, a highly industrialized nation with advanced technology, sound doctrine and a modern battle fleet. From the outset it was apparent that a sustained naval campaign would be necessary to roll back Japanese forces and establish the degree of sea control needed to permit an invasion of the home islands.

WORLD WAR TWO amphibious assaults were self-contained tactical battles fought within the context of a larger maritime campaign. US forces needed advance bases to support extended fleet and air operations. Fleet Commanders employed Marine and Army landing forces to seize bases needed to sustain offensive operations and protect fleet communications. The Commander Amphibious Task Force (CATF) of WORLD WAR TWO and Korea, unlike his modern contemporary, controlled a powerful naval armada made up of amphibious forces, carriers, battleships, cruisers, supply ships and a myriad of escort and control vessels. Most amphibious objectives were small and offered the attacker few opportunities to maneuver or achieve surprise over the enemy. The standard scheme was to subject the defenders to a massive preparatory naval bombardment followed by a frontal assault across the beach by the landing force.

Keeping Marine forces subordinate to the WORLD WAR TWO fleet commanders made sense for several reasons. Amphibious assaults were supporting attacks for a larger maritime campaign in which amphibious operations were used to attain fleet objectives. The landing force placed total reliance on the Navy to set all conditions for the operation. The Marine Corps of this era lacked any real ability to attack in depth. Its small command elements were configured to operate at the tactical level of war. Marine aviation had begun to develop doctrine, techniques and procedures for providing close air support to maneuver units, but true air/ground integration had yet to evolve. Marine carrier-based aviation was as likely to be employed for fleet air defense as in support of landing force operations. Once ashore, the landing force remained tied to the Beach Support Area (BSA) and lacked the ability to move inland much beyond the Force Beachhead Line (FBHL). Technology constraints in the area of field communications made it necessary for CATF to retain amphibious command and control of the forces until CLF could establish a physical presence ashore and assume tactical control of the operation.

#### ***The Slow Transition from Tactical to Operational Capability***

The amphibious landing at Inchon demonstrated the utility of amphibious operations at the operational level of war. The combination of a land offensive with a major amphibious operation in the enemy's rear area unhinged the North Korean army and transformed the military situation on the Korean Peninsula overnight. The Marine Corps of this era, like its WORLD WAR TWO predecessor, lacked the doctrine, organization and equipment to plan and conduct operational level warfare. It would take nearly thirty years of effort to transform the Marine Corps from serving as a mere appendage of the US Navy into a

combined arms expeditionary force capable of achieving decisive results at the operational level of war.

During the 1980's, two important innovations appeared that enhanced Marine Corps expeditionary capabilities: the Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) program and the establishment of the Maritime Pre-positioning Force (MPF). MEU (SOC)'s received additional training and technology upgrades that gave them the ability to function as the operational HQ for a Joint Task Force, if required. The MPF was created to help compensate for the dwindling size of the Navy's amphibious fleet. These programs helped the Marine Corps achieve significant improvements in operational C2 and mobility; CMPF-based Marine Expeditionary Brigades could now be combined with forward deployed MEUs and Air Contingency MAGTFs to provide the JFC with a credible combat capability in a relatively short period of time.

Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM highlighted the extent of the Corps' transformation from a tactical assault force into a modern expeditionary organization capable of conducting a wide range of operations across the spectrum of conflict. The Command Element of I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF CE), acting as the Marine component HQ for US Central Command, exercised command and control over 107,000 Marines and sailors - the largest grouping of Marine forces ever assembled for combat.

Of particular interest during DESERT STORM was the decision to keep two MEBs at sea under JFMCC control. These forces were used during deception operations to favorably influence the disposition of Iraqi forces defending Kuwait. CG I MEF's inability to assign tactical missions to these forces even while acting as the Marine service

component clashed with the Corp's "single battle" concept and led many to conclude that existing amphibious doctrine had become absurd<sup>2</sup>.

### ***A Changing Strategic Environment***

A full decade after the Soviet Empire's collapse, policy makers have just begun to discern the shape of the emerging security environment. While no single vision of the future can be accepted as reality, analyzing key economic, political, social and cultural drivers enables us to make some basic assumptions about the vitality of the global system<sup>3</sup>. Demographically, the world is becoming younger, poorer, less educated, more concentrated in cities, more unemployed and generally less content. By 2015, economic progress and accelerating globalization may actually widen the gap between advanced and developing countries. The rich will reap the benefits of technological innovation while the poor fall even further behind. It is from this group of disaffected youth that the "new warriors" will emerge; those who feel victimized by the negative effects of globalization, who feel that progress has past them by and who regard violence as the only form of expression available to them.

Future military conflicts will look less like DESERT STORM and more like Chechnya or Sierra Leone. Future enemies will avoid direct confrontations against US conventional power and instead seek to employ asymmetric means of attack. America's phobia over "collateral damage" will be used as a strategy to negate clear US advantage in firepower and technology. Enemy warriors will withdraw into the cities where they can hide and operate among the urban population. as Threats to regional stability will increase as violence spreads outward from the cities and spills across national borders making some form of US military response necessary in order to contain the conflict. General Charles Krulak,



former Commandant of the Marine Corps, referred to these operations as the "3 block war"; a complex situation where Marines will be required to conduct concurrent missions ranging from humanitarian relief, peacekeeping and high intensity combat in the space of 3 city blocks<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Post Cold War Navy/Marine Corps Operational Concepts***

Today's US Navy was built to defeat the Soviet Red Banner Fleet. When that threat disappeared in 1991, the Navy scrambled to redefine itself and collaborated with the Marine Corps to publish two brief operational concepts espousing the value of naval power in the littorals. "From the Sea" (1992) and "Forward...From the Sea" (1994) implied that the Navy and Marine Corps were literally "on the same page" in identifying the littorals as the future operating environment for forward deployed Naval Expeditionary Forces.

The Marine Corps took its own littoral vision a step further with the release of "Operational Maneuver From the Sea" (OMFTS) in 1996. OMFTS is defined as "the maneuver of naval forces at the operational level, a bold bid for victory that aims at exploiting a significant enemy weakness in order to deal a decisive blow"<sup>5</sup>. Conceptually, it relies on an understanding of enemy and friendly centers of gravity (COG) in order to identify weak points for exploitation. Sea-based forces conduct over-the-horizon attacks in the flank and rear to unhinge the enemy and destroy his COG. The OMFTS concept was updated in time for last year's Quadrennial Defense Review as "Marine Corps Strategy 21" which extends the MAGTF's operational reach beyond the littorals to deep inland objectives (as in Afghanistan).

### ***The "NEF" Debate***

The term "Naval Expeditionary Force" (NEF) appeared in "From the Sea" as a generic reference to task organized Navy and Marine Corps

forces employed for littoral operations<sup>6</sup>. Collaboration between deployed CVBGs and ARG/MEUs had become a common occurrence and led to the implementation of joint pre-deployment training to enhance interoperability and establish working relationships between commanders and staffs. The habitual partnership of these units led to the widespread use of the term "NEF" as nearly equivalent to the doctrinal terms "Task Force" or "Task Group". The term never received official sanction but continued to be used in the fleet as a shorthand way to refer to expeditionary force packages. It wasn't long before proposals for establishing a standing Naval Expeditionary Task Force (NETF) appeared in print causing some consternation within the higher echelons of the naval services<sup>7</sup>. Finally, on October 1, 1997 the term NETF was officially disavowed in a joint CNO/CMC message that directed the fleet to drop the concept until further notice<sup>8</sup>.

The most common explanation given for the NETF's demise was that no agreement could be reached as to who would command the organization<sup>9</sup>. Once again, the discussion has gone full circle: times have changed; the threat has changed; we must change; how do we change? Why must the Navy always exercise command of Marines afloat? Are Marines trying to break away from the Navy? Does current amphibious doctrine support OMFTS? Should the CVBG Commander always be in charge of a NETF? The same questions appear again and again but are never resolved.

#### ***The Next Step: A Refined NEF Operational Concept***

A Naval Expeditionary Force Command Element (NEF CE) should be established as a standing HQ to plan and execute expeditionary operations in the littoral. The organization would be commanded by a 3-star Marine General with a Navy flag officer designated as deputy commander. Senior staff positions would be split equally between the

Navy and Marine Corps as would those within the various staff sections.

The CE should be located within the supported AOR - either ashore or afloat - in order to facilitate planning with higher, adjacent and supporting units and permit a smooth transition from maritime to littoral operations. Allocating a ship like USS CORONADO to CNEF - a warfighter - would represent a better use a valuable C3 platform than leaving it with C3F - a trainer. The CNEF concept has particular applicability in CENTCOM and PACOM given the important role accorded to amphibious and MPF forces for major regional conflicts in those AORs.

#### ***CNEF Planning functions***

Upon receipt of the mission, CNEF conducts detailed mission analysis to identify operational objectives, assess threats and define force requirements. As an operational warfighter, CNEF coordinates directly with the theater Commander and/or JFC, as well as with the other service and functional components of the JTF. The CNEF battle staff conducts all battlespace functions required for deployment, employment and redeployment of forces controlled by CNEF during the campaign or major operation (described below). Naval Expeditionary Forces are combined to create force packages specifically tailored to the needs of the mission. A NEF assembled for humanitarian relief operations may base itself around the robust medical and logistical capabilities found in an ARG, while another tasked for warfighting needs the strike capabilities found in a MAGTF or CVBG. Whatever the tactical composition of the NEF, the element (MAGTF, CVBG, etc.) responsible for conducting decisive operations - i.e. those that achieve the operational objective - will be designated as the NEF main effort.

#### ***CNEF and JFMCC: Competitors or Companions?***

Because CNEF effectively serves as the Combatant Commander's functional component for littoral operations, the relationship between CNEF and JFMCC must be one of equals. The likelihood of significant overlap between maritime and littoral tasks within the JOA requires that the responsibilities and actions of these two commanders be de-conflicted. During peacetime, naval forces engaged in forward presence activities are controlled by JFMCC. The NEF is assembled and chopped to CNEF only after an operational tasking is received from the Combatant Commander; therefore, CNEF owns no combat forces on a standing basis.

During normal peacetime conditions CNEF and his staff remain focused on operational warfighting issues like IPB, campaign/contingency planning and joint/combined exercises involving Naval Expeditionary Forces. Forward deployed Naval Expeditionary Forces are likely to provide most of the ISR, strike and C2 capability available to the Combatant Commander in the early stages of a crisis. JFMCC may require CNEF's support to establish control of the JOA and set conditions needed to project decisive US power into the area. A more comprehensive discussion of how expeditionary operations fit into the larger warfighting scheme will follow; for now it is enough to recognize that versatility of Naval Expeditionary Forces allows them to be combined in a variety of ways to create flexible, highly adaptive force packages.

The warfighting relationship between CNEF and JFMCC is best understood when viewed in the context of a campaign or major operation for which forces must deploy to the theater, enter and operate within a JOA and finally redeploy. Initially JFMCC conducts maritime operations to secure SLOCs for deploying forces (figure 1.). JFMCC then attains control of the air and sea space within the JOA in order to create freedom of action for follow-on forces employed to achieve the Combatant

Commander's endstate. Once JFMCC has neutralized the maritime threat within the JOA, CNEF assumes control of a Littoral Operations Area (LOA) - defined as the sea, air and land space needed to conduct sea-based

### Enabling Operations

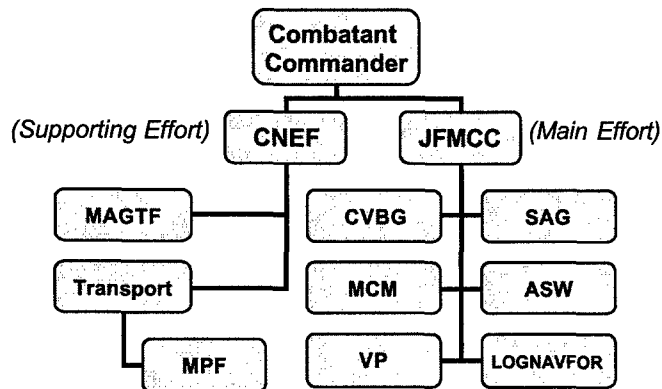
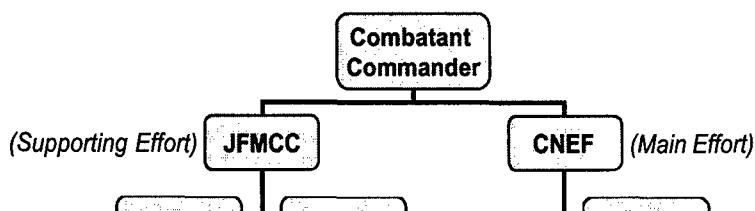


Figure 1.

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objective (figure 2.). Once the mission of the NEF has been achieved, CNEF may conduct a battle hand-over (BHO) with the Land Component Commander (if one is established), continue sustained operations ashore or commence redeployment. Once the LOA is disestablished and the

### Decisive Operations



NEF is dissolved, the JFMCC assumes control of all sea areas within the JOA and CNEF resumes planning for future expeditionary operations.

The Marine Expeditionary Force CE provides a useful model for CNEF staff organization. The MEF CE is capable of providing effective command and control over operations occurring throughout the rear, close, distant and deep areas of the assigned battlespace. The organization of the battle staff into current ops, future ops and plans generates tempo by allowing the MEF to fight one battle, while simultaneously planning sequels and future operations. As the CE for a 50,000 man MAGTF, the MEF is particularly experienced in air/ground coordination, maneuver, logistics and operational fires. The MEF Force Fires Coordination Center is capable of integrating all lethal and non-lethal fires available to the joint force to support expeditionary operations.

A notional organization of the CNEF CE is shown in figure (3.). The staff is organized into six functional sections. The Aviation section is headed by the senior naval air commander within the NEF who also serves as CNEF's overall air coordinator. The Air section produces the ATO to for the NEF and supports the concept of fires developed by the Strike section. The Maneuver section monitors the execution phase of current NEF operations and plans future operations out to 96

## Notional CNEF Staff Organization

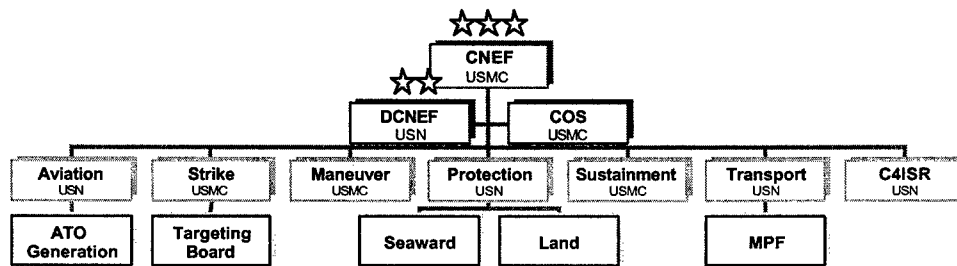


Figure 3.

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CNEF's senior fire support coordinator who develops a comprehensive concept of fire to support maneuver. CNEF plans and executes operational and tactical fires using organic and joint assets to strike throughout the battlespace. This section also conducts the NEF targeting process and is responsible for the integration of NEF fires into the Combatant Commander's overall shaping effort. The Protection section manages the defense of NEF sea-based assets and any APODs/SPODs established within the LOA to support NEF or follow-on forces. The Sustainment section serves as the link between tactical and theater logistics for the NEF and manages the APODs/SPODs located within the LOA. The Transport section coordinates operational mobility issues involving amphibious shipping, MSC ships, and the MPF. A JSTOF section may be included if significant Special Operations Forces are assign to operate with the NEF.

Tour lengths for the Commander and senior staff should be a minimum of 24 months duration to provide continuity of command and facilitate plan development. The remaining billets could be filled with personnel serving tours lasting from between 6 and 24 months.

As previously noted, the biggest impediment to the NEF concept has been deciding who should be CNEF. Captain Sam Tangredi, writing in the November 1999 issue of Proceedings, identified several potential candidates to command the NEF:<sup>11</sup>

- (1) CVBG Commander
- (2) MAGTF Commander
- (3) Commander Amphibious Task Force (CATF)
- (4) JTF Commander
- (5) None - unity of effort

Most of the standing staffs are relatively small and best suited for operating at the tactical level of war. The CVBG staff is experienced in conducting the targeting process and building an ATO, but lacks the MAGTF's expertise in expeditionary warfare planning, operational maneuver and combined arms integration. Although the ATF operates from a very capable C2 platform, it is unaccustomed to planning operational fires throughout the JOA and normally defers to the CVBG or MAGTF for strike, maneuver and airspace control functions. Because JTF staffs are typically ad hoc organizations that lack common procedures of any type, they exhibit a significant learning curve upon activation.

### **Conclusion**

The current utility of Naval Expeditionary Forces in the war on terror provides the perfect opportunity for the senior leadership of the Navy and Marine Corps to take the next logical step towards achieving a unified operational concept for the Naval Service. Establishing a permanent CNEF CE - either from scratch or by assigning the mission to an existing operational USN/USMC HQ - will enhance the effectiveness of Naval Expeditionary Forces. Regardless of which path is followed, assigning CNEF as the functional component for expeditionary warfare is



an essential step in aligning doctrine with future warfighting concepts and reaffirming the inviolability of the Navy/Marine Corps partnership.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> CMC Washington DC//CMC 101900Z MAR 00, unclassified naval message.

<sup>2</sup> US Marine Corps, Marine Corps Planning Process, MCWP 5-1 (Washington, DC: 5 January 2000), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> National Intelligence Council, "Global Trends 2015: A Dialogue About the Future With Nongovernmental Experts", NIC 2000-02, (December 2000).7.

<sup>4</sup> Krulak, GEN Charles H. Commandant of the Marine Corps, Interviewed by Jim Leher, PBS News Hour, 25 June 1999.

<sup>5</sup> US Marine Corps, Expeditionary Operations, MCDP 3 (Washington, DC: 16 April 1998), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Department of the Navy, "...From the Sea". Navy-Marine Corps White Paper (Washington, DC: 1992), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Tangredi, Sam J. "Who's Afraid of the NETF?" U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings (November 1999), 45.

<sup>8</sup> McKearney, T.J. "CNETF, We Hardly Knew Ye." U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings (January 1998), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> The definition cited is not an authorized doctrinal term but is used here as a plausible descriptor of the littoral environment as seen from a CNEF perspective.

<sup>11</sup> Tangredi, 46-47.

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